

## DENTON COUNTY CONFEDERATE MONUMENT

### I. CONTEXT

On February 2, 1861, delegates to the Texas secession convention issued its *Declaration of Causes*. This document explained the reasons that the delegates had voted overwhelmingly for the state to leave the Union and join the nascent Confederate States of America to “promote her welfare, insure domestic tranquility and secure more substantially the blessings of peace and liberty to her people.”<sup>1</sup> Of course, as contemporary readers of this declaration would have known, these blessings of liberty were not meant to be bestowed upon all residents of this new confederacy. Rather, the delegates explain that the confederacy was formed “exclusively by the white race, for themselves and their posterity; that the African race had no agency in their establishment; that they were rightfully held and regarded as an inferior and dependent race, and in that condition only could their existence in this country be rendered beneficial or tolerable.”<sup>2</sup> As frequently stressed throughout the declaration, these delegates saw the potential for the curtailment or abolition of slavery as the primary justification for secession, though their defense of the institution took various forms. Foremost among these was not the threat of disruption to the agrarian southern economy, but rather the potential dissolution of racial hierarchies undergirded by the “beneficent and patriarchal system of African slavery.”<sup>3</sup> In their eyes, abolition would eventually lead to political equality between the white and black races, a

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<sup>1</sup> “Declaration of Causes: February 2, 1861: A declaration of the causes which impel the State of Texas to secede from the Federal Union,” *Texas State Library and Archives Commission*, August 25, 2011.

<https://www.tsl.texas.gov/ref/abouttx/secession/2feb1861.html>.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

condition that would “bring inevitable calamities upon both and desolation upon the fifteen slave-holding States.”<sup>4</sup>

Following the convention, the voting citizens of Texas ratified secession by almost a four-to-one margin in February 1861.<sup>5</sup> In Denton County, however, the contest was significantly closer. Perhaps due to the relatively low proportion of slaves in the county (251 out of a total county population of 4,780), the citizens ratified secession by a comparatively slim 331 to 264 vote.<sup>6</sup> Nonetheless, following secession and the outbreak of war, the Confederacy was widely popular among the free residents of Denton County. The county demonstrated its support by organizing five companies of soldiers, contributing a remarkably large contingent of 1,200 soldiers to the Confederate ranks.<sup>7</sup> Fortunately for those left behind, the county was far from any organized fighting during the four years of the war. Its economy, based largely on subsistence farming and local industry, similarly avoided much of the financial woes that befell parts of the state that were more dependent on slavery and large-scale trade.<sup>8</sup> These facts ensured that postwar rebuilding would be less difficult than elsewhere in the south, but the emotional weight of defeat still plagued the county’s soldiers upon their return home. Over the next several decades, these soldiers and their descendants would grapple with the legacy of the secession and the humiliation of defeat in the arena of historical memory.

## II. OVERVIEW

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<sup>4</sup> “Declaration of Causes.”

<sup>5</sup> Walter L. Buenger, “Secession Convention,” *Handbook of Texas Online*, accessed October 1, 2018, <https://tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/mjs01>.

<sup>6</sup> E. Dale Odom, *An Illustrated History of Denton County, Texas: From Peters Colony to Metroplex* (Denton TX: E. Dale Odom, 1996), 25-26.

<sup>7</sup> “Dixie Zeal Sent 1200 Into Confederate Lines,” *Denton Record-Chronicle*, February 3, 1957.

<sup>8</sup> Odom, 26.

Among the southern groups that sought to influence historical interpretation of the war, none was more prominent or successful than the United Daughters of the Confederacy (UDC). Formally established in Tennessee in 1894, the organization quickly spread to Texas, where the first chapter opened in Galveston in 1896.<sup>9</sup> UDC chapters were comprised of “widows, wives, mothers, sisters, nieces and lineal descendants” of Confederate soldiers.<sup>10</sup> Given the number of ex-Confederates in the south, such qualifications would exclude very few southern women from membership. In 1905, ten prominent women founded the Denton County branch of the UDC, with Mrs. A. L. Banks serving as president.<sup>11</sup> Since chapters of the Texas UDC were traditionally named after prominent figures, the women of Denton chose as their namesake Katie Daffan, a visiting professor at the nearby College of Industrial Arts and executive board member of the Texas UDC.

These women tasked themselves with a number of duties, including caring after aging veterans. This typically took the form of fundraising, with chapters holding public events to collect money for veterans’ homes, medical clinics, or individual welfare. In Denton, this took several forms, including an “Old Folks’ Concert and Fiddlers’ Contest” that raised \$185 to secure spots for local veterans in a Confederate home in Austin.<sup>12</sup> The Katie Daffan chapter also led efforts to rename the city schools of Denton after Confederate leaders and supply all public schools with portraits of Stonewall Jackson and Robert E. Lee.<sup>13</sup> These labors were part of a larger campaign by the UDC to shape the discussion of Civil War history toward a more

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<sup>9</sup> *Proceedings of the Twenty-Second Annual Convention of the Texas Division United Daughters of the Confederacy* (Longview TX, 1917), 17.

<sup>10</sup> “United Daughters of the Confederacy Constitution”, in *Proceedings*, 167.

<sup>11</sup> Viola Riley Berry, “Historical Sketch of Katie Daffan Chapter U.D.C.”, *The Portal to Texas History*, accessed August 13, 2018, 4.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

favorable interpretation of southern motivations and deeds. Their work to “instill into the minds of all an inflexible determination to perpetuate the traditions and literature of the South; to collect and preserve material for a true history of the war between the Confederate States and the United States of America” would quickly extend well beyond the classroom.<sup>14</sup>

In their attempts to rehabilitate the reputation of the Confederacy, the UDC was both shaped by and a primary developer of the southern ideology that would become known as the Lost Cause. This ideology reframed the war as a battle between hopelessly outnumbered Confederate forces vainly struggling against a numerically superior opponent, fighting for southern honor and liberty. As the UDC state historian reminded her audience at the 1917 convention, “Success was not the test. He wins most who honor saves.”<sup>15</sup> Lost Cause narratives commonly lionized Confederate leaders, emphasized the heroism of common soldiers, and celebrated the role of “Spartan wives and mothers”.<sup>16</sup>

Most importantly, the movement diligently minimized any mention of the role of slavery in precipitating the conflict. Slavery was rarely discussed in any context, though when it was, the discussion typically followed one of two patterns. UDC members occasionally mentioned slavery in order to explicitly deny that it influenced the decision to go to war, as when Mrs. P. S. Summers gave short shrift to it in her 1917 address to the UDC convention “Causes that Led to the War Between the States”: “Slavery? No, that did not enter as a constitutional clause.”<sup>17</sup> More commonly, adherents of Lost Cause ideology presented slavery as a charitable institution in which paternalistic owners cared for their grateful servants. Later in Summers’ oration, she

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<sup>14</sup> “United Daughters of the Confederacy Constitution”, 165.

<sup>15</sup> *Proceedings*, 55.

<sup>16</sup> David Blight, *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory* (Cambridge MA: Harvard College, 2001).

<sup>17</sup> *Proceedings*, 59.

contends that Northerners abandoned their slaves and that the south therefore “had to cradle the infant race, nurtured it out of barbarism, printed civilization on its face.”<sup>18</sup> Faithful slave stories took a number of forms at the convention, including nostalgic stories of enslaved caregivers, such as “Mammy’s Song” and “Sayings and Superstitions of Black Mammy.”<sup>19</sup> They occasionally took corporeal form as well, as when a *Denton Record-Chronicle* reporter celebrated the appearance of an “old white haired darkey” among a 1917 reunion of Confederate veterans.<sup>20</sup> As much as possible, however, the UDC simply avoided discussion of the issue at all, instead offering an alternative narrative of a war predicated upon abstract ideals.

In late 1909, the Katie Daffan chapter decided to further their educational mission by funding the construction of a public monument to the county’s Confederate veterans. Part of a coordinated push by the UDC to erect memorials throughout the south, the proposed monument received consistent support from the *Denton Record and Chronicle*, which argued that the proposed cost of \$2,000 should easily be raised for “as noble a band of men as ever went out from any country to fight for a principle”<sup>21</sup> Not wanting to pay for the monument through subscription drives, the Katie Daffan chapter instead sought to raise funds through sponsored entertainment, tag days (in which those who donated were given wearable ribbons), and competitions. The first such event took place at the downtown opera house, as the chapter staged a performance of the play “An American Hustler”.<sup>22</sup> Despite the initial plan to have the monument erected by 1911, fundraising was lackluster in the early years of the campaign. In 1913, the UDC finally secured a construction contract with an unnamed national marble works at

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<sup>18</sup> *Proceedings*, 59.

<sup>19</sup> *Proceedings*, 14, 61.

<sup>20</sup> *Denton Record-Chronicle*, November 12, 1917. The *Denton Record and Chronicle* dropped the “and” in 1915, becoming the *Denton Record-Chronicle*.

<sup>21</sup> *Denton Record and Chronicle*, December 8, 1909.

<sup>22</sup> *Denton Record and Chronicle*, January 29, 1910.

a cost of \$5,000, significantly higher than the UDC's initial projections.<sup>23</sup> Nonetheless, the women of the Katie Daffan chapter remained sanguine about their project. By the end of the year, the chapter again declared that the monument would be unveiled within a year.<sup>24</sup>

This prediction proved once again to be overly optimistic. In fact, at the end of 1915, the monument fund stood at a meager \$350.<sup>25</sup> In response, the UDC decided to cancel their original contract in favor of a cheaper alternative. Their negotiations with the marble works resulted in a new agreement for a \$2,000 monument, on the condition that the Katie Daffan chapter officially approve the contract by November 1917.<sup>26</sup> In typical fashion, the chapter had no intention of waiting that long. Shortly after finalizing their new agreement, the UDC announced that the monument would be unveiled on June 3, 1916 to coincide with Jefferson Davis' birthday.<sup>27</sup> Though the Katie Daffan chapter continued to hold small events to raise money, progress continued at slow pace. The women were once again forced to delay their opening to June 1, 1917.<sup>28</sup> In an effort to inspire greater efforts from members, chapter president Maggie Yancey instituted a novel approach to fundraising. Yancey appointed four members to chair committees, with each committee assigned to a side of the courthouse square. Whichever group added the most to the monument fund would forever have the distinction of having the monument built on their side of the square.<sup>29</sup> With the success of this strategy, the monument finally appeared to be an attainable goal. With almost \$1,400 committed to the cause, the chapter felt confident that the monument could be unveiled at last in January 1918.

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<sup>23</sup> *Denton Record and Chronicle*, January 15, 1913.

<sup>24</sup> *Denton Record and Chronicle*, October 23, 1913.

<sup>25</sup> Berry, 6-7.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid*, 7.

<sup>27</sup> *Denton Record-Chronicle*, November 15, 1915.

<sup>28</sup> *Denton Record-Chronicle*, December 11, 1916.

<sup>29</sup> Berry, 7.

Events far from home threatened to derail the project, however. The American entry into the First World War in April 1917, which brought with it the largest draft in American history and a widespread mobilization of the home front, dominated the attention of the public. For the UDC, though, the war presented an opportunity to connect their traditional organizational goals to wartime patriotic fervor. At the 1917 state convention, almost every speaker drew parallels between Confederate glory and the heroism of American soldiers abroad. In one such speech, the UDC state historian drew an explicit connection between the two veteran groups, stating that “while we grieve to see the Gray line vanishing out of the sunset of life into the golden dawn, we see advancing in their footsteps another army of boys in khaki.”<sup>30</sup> The UDC therefore shifted much of their attention to the war relief work, most prominently in support of the Red Cross and in purchasing Liberty Bonds. The UDC state president was careful to point out, however, that such endeavors should not prevent the chapters from continuing to teach “the great principles for which our fathers fought and died, and our mothers wrought in pain, sorrow and privations.”<sup>31</sup> Considering whether to delay their monument project until the conclusion of the war, the Katie Daffan chapter would similarly connect their laudation of Confederate soldiers to the home front effort. With the chapter required to accept or decline the monument company’s contract by November 1917, the women determined that “this beautiful reminder of the heroic deeds of our fathers would inspire patriotism in the hearts of our children.”<sup>32</sup> The contract was approved.

After five missed deadlines, the UDC chose the final unveiling date of June 3, 1918. Two weeks earlier, they held a ceremony for the laying of the cornerstone, into which they placed a history of the county, rosters of veterans and their family members, a UDC yearbook,

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<sup>30</sup> *Proceedings*, 56.

<sup>31</sup> *Proceedings*, 1.

<sup>32</sup> Berry, 7.

and the Confederate and United States flags. In an act of symbolic reconciliation, the two flags were intertwined as the chapter president declared, “There is no blue or gray. The two are blended in the national brown worn by our gallant sons today.”<sup>33</sup> The monument was completed shortly thereafter, but the UDC withheld the formal unveiling for Jefferson Davis’ birthday on June 3<sup>rd</sup>. Expecting a large crowd at their afternoon ceremony, the chapter constructed a large platform to hold the event’s speakers and distinguished guests, the county’s surviving Confederate veterans and their families.<sup>34</sup> A procession of orators lavished praise on the veterans, taking care to connect these statements to the current conflict, which the *Record-Chronicle* noted “could not be overlooked, as not more than fifty yards from the stand was a troop of Denton county boys just mustered in and drilling in preparation for their country’s (sic) service.”<sup>35</sup> The principle speaker, former state senator J. B. Wiley, assured the crowd that the historical judgment of these veterans would be similarly positive: “The Confederate soldiers were not traitors – the men who went out from the South were God-fearing patriotic men who believed their cause was just.” This cause, Wiley reminded his audience, had nothing to do with slavery, an issue that he suggested was not morally contentious at the time.<sup>36</sup> Rather, the men were fighting for states’ rights, though the senator elected not to specify which rights in particular generated such animosity between the states.

The head of the local chapter of the United Confederate Veterans (UCV) gave the final speech of the afternoon, declaring that he was certain that future generations of children would view the monument and feel pride for the Confederacy.<sup>37</sup> Indeed, the monument has now stood

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<sup>33</sup> *Denton Record-Chronicle*, May 15, 1915.

<sup>34</sup> *Denton Record-Chronicle*, June 1, 1915.

<sup>35</sup> *Denton Record-Chronicle*, June 7, 1915.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>37</sup> *Denton Record-Chronicle*, June 7, 1915.



for over a century, and continues to advocate for the admiration of Confederate deeds. The structure consists of a large marble arch over the south sidewalk of the Denton County Courthouse-on-the-Square. Topping the arch is a life-size statue of a Confederate private, standing at rest, rifle in hand. Though some reports have speculated that this soldier faces south as a symbol of his allegiance to his home region, the location of the monument actually stems from the aforementioned competition among UDC members to raise funds. Sallie Owsley, assigned to chair the south side committee, outraised her fellow chairs, ensuring that the monument would be placed on her assigned section of the square.<sup>38</sup> An October 1915 article in the *Denton Record-Chronicle* states that the Katie Daffan chapter was negotiating an arrangement with “McNeil Marble Company” (actually the “McNeel Marble Company” of Marietta, Georgia), the largest manufacturer of Confederate monuments in the south.<sup>39</sup> Though the chapter eventually negotiated a new contract for a cheaper monument, it is likely that they did so with the original company.<sup>40</sup>

The monument contains the phrase “OUR CONFEDERATE SOLDIERS” and the letters “CSA” above the arch. Each leg of the arch bears an inscription. The left reads, “Erected by the daughters of the Confederacy in Memory of Our Confederate Soldiers, who in heroic self-sacrifice and devoted loyalty gave their manhood and their lives to the south in her hour of need.” The right column bears the words “In memoriam,” followed by an excerpt from Tennyson’s “Tiresius”: “Their names graved on memorial columns are a song heard far in the future, and their examples reach a hand through all the years to meet and kindle generous

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<sup>38</sup> Berry, 7.

<sup>39</sup> *Denton Record-Chronicle*, October 30, 1915.

<sup>40</sup> In *History and Reminiscences of Denton County* (Denton, TX: McNitzky Printing Co., 1918), former Denton mayor Ed F. Bates states that the completed monument was topped with Georgia marble, suggesting that the UDC had likely remained with Georgia-based McNeel Marble Company.

purpose and mold it into acts as pure as theirs.” Below these statements are two water fountains with the years 1861 and 1865 inscribed on their bowls. Early work to connect water lines to this source of water were unsuccessful, preventing the fountains from being turned on until over a year after the monument’s unveiling.<sup>41</sup> Over its lifetime, the monument has remained largely the same, with a few notable exceptions. A light fixture that originally appeared directly under the arch is no longer extant.<sup>42</sup> In recent years, one of the two cannonball-sized spheres that once appeared next to the Confederate soldier has gone missing. Additionally, the hardware to the water fountains, which have long been inoperable, is no longer attached. Despite these changes, the UDC would likely be pleased to know that their monument continues to promote its message into its second century of existence.

### III. SIGNIFICANCE

While the inscriptions on the Confederate monument proclaim the same message originally inscribed in 1918, the citizens of Denton County continue to debate the meaning and impact of this monument to this day. Much of the discussion has centered on the issues of slavery, white supremacy, and their place in historical memory. Indeed, racial inequality was a prominent phenomenon in Denton County at the time of the monument’s unveiling, as it was elsewhere in the Jim Crow south. During the height of the UDC fundraising campaign, D.W. Griffith’s *The Birth of a Nation* played multiple showings at the College of Industrial Arts, and “the great crowd there cheered the Confederacy, Dixie, the Ku Klux Klan, and the ascendancy of

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<sup>41</sup> *Denton Record-Chronicle*, September 8, 1919.

<sup>42</sup> *Denton Record-Chronicle*, October 27, 1920.

the Anglo-Saxon race over negroes and Northern carpetbaggers.”<sup>43</sup> Four years after the dedication of the monument, such racial animus reached one of its most dramatic peaks as the county evicted the residents of the African American community known as Quakertown in order to make room for a civic park. The president of the College of Industrial Arts suggested an alternative motivation, arguing that relocating the segregated community farther from the center of town would “rid the college of the menace of the negro quarters in close proximity to the college and thereby remove the danger” in a “business way and without friction.”<sup>44</sup>

Debates over the monument have been increasingly common in recent years, coinciding with a greater national discussion about Confederate memorials. Critics of the monument have argued that it promotes a bad-faith revisionist narrative in which the African American experience and stated motivations for secession are ignored, serving as another means of tacitly endorsing white supremacy in a “business way and without friction”. Others contend that the monument was simply an effort by the descendants of Confederate soldiers to honor their forefathers by conveying their actions in a positive light. Accordingly, the elision of the challenging topics surrounding secession is an act of familial affection, rather than a validation of racial inequality. As is often the case in discussions of historical memory, both sides of this debate contend that they are motivated by a desire to avoid adulterating the history of the war, its causes, its participants, and its aftermath.

In the twenty-first century, the county has twice acted to interpret the monument in response to public critiques. In 2004, the county placed an interpretive plaque next to the monument, the wording of which was revised in 2010 to meet approval of the Texas Historical

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<sup>43</sup> *Denton Record-Chronicle*, January 18, 1917.

<sup>44</sup> *Denton Record-Chronicle*, November 19, 1920.

Commission. In 2017, the county organized the Denton County Confederate Memorial Advisory Committee to offer recommendations on how to preserve the monument. The committee ultimately voted to retain the monument on the square while adding additional interpretive material. What form this material will take remains to be determined.

In his award-winning study of Civil War memory, historian David Blight argues that Americans have traditionally favored simpler narratives over complex struggles with meaning: “For Americans broadly, the Civil War has been a defining event upon which we have often imposed unity and continuity; as a culture, we have often preferred its music and pathos to its enduring challenges, the theme of reconciled conflict to resurgent, unresolved legacies.”<sup>45</sup> Upon its unveiling in 1918, the UDC presented the Denton County Confederate monument as a visual representation of unity, continuity, and reconciled conflict. As recent debates have shown, however, the people of Denton County continue to struggle with the unresolved legacies of the Civil War.

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<sup>45</sup> Blight, 4.